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ABSTRACT

Federal funding from the School to Work Opportunities Act (STOWA) has ended. There is no doubt that state policy to advance activities started under STOWA will be a major factor in the sustainability of School to Work. Already some states have taken the initiative for bringing higher standards to education by offering incentives for businesses to participate in STW programs. Commitment is the key where state policy is involved. But not all states have been able to muster enthusiasm for STW. Continued funding could advance and broaden workplace learning experiences for students and teachers. Self-interest and cost savings are motivators for employers to provide work-based training opportunities. Although most sources believe STW has been a success, not all stakeholders accept this view. The three concepts that characterize the STW initiative school-based learning, work-based learning, and connections between school and work have not been implemented equally across all schools. Conclusions about the effectiveness of the STW initiative include the following: (1) STW has improved attendance, academic achievement, graduation rates, and academic rigor in classrooms; (2) STW has prepared students for college entrance and decreased attrition rates; and (3) STW has helped prepare young people for employment and helped them obtain higher quality jobs with better wages than they might normally get. (15 references) (AJ)

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MYTHS AND REALITIES NO. 24

School to Work after the School to Work Opportunities Act

by Bettina Lankard Brown
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In July 1994, Congress passed the School to Work Opportunities Act (STWOA), allocating funds to establish statewide partnerships designed to prepare students with knowledge and skills required for employment in the workplace. Recent reports show that STW has varied considerably across these partnerships, resulting in differing views on the viability of its programs. Now that federal funding from STWOA has ended, what is the aftermath? What are the chances for sustaining STW now that funding has ceased? To what extent have STW efforts been institutionalized and supported by local business? How do the perceptions and commitment of teachers, educators, students and parents influence the self-sustaining future of school to work (STW)? This Myths and Realities looks at the issues as they apply to life after STWOA.

State Policies and Funding Strategies Ensure that STW Programs Are Sustained

There is no doubt that state policy to advance activities started under the federal grant will be a major factor in the sustainability of STW (Miller and Fleegler 2000). Already, some states have taken the initiative for bringing higher standards to education by offering incentives for business to participate in STW programs. In Colorado, for example, the General Assembly passed a law in 1997 giving businesses a 10 percent tax credit for participating in its School-to-Career program (Eslinger 1998). In Connecticut, efforts to sustain STW have involved the hiring of an STW coordinator whose main responsibility is to focus on community outreach (Cutshall 2001c).

Commitment is the key where state policy is involved. Alan Hershey, a senior fellow with Mathematica Policy Research Inc. in Princeton, New Jersey, has evaluated the progress of STW for the U.S. Department of Education. He predicted that unless states are actively committed to STW, the partnerships established through the STWOA would dissolve once federal funding ceases. States such as Michigan and Wisconsin will likely fund or find ways to use employment and training and technical education dollars to fund STW activities because they are committed to STW, as evidenced by their record (Kiser 1999). In Wisconsin, "85% of the school districts receive STW funds and 93% of high schools are involved in STW" (Hettinger 1998, p. 23). When states are as heavily committed to the tenets of STW as these two states, they are likely to find other funding sources to continue their STW programs (Hettinger 1998).

Not all states, however, have been able to muster enthusiasm for STW. Lack of focus on sustained education reform rather than short-term gains, limited data-capturing ability, and controversy about school-to-work have yielded results that do not inspire commitment (Brand et al. 2000). Four factors have contributed to the weakening of STW initiatives: political realignments, the complexity of the STW vision, a reliance on the more easily accomplished implementation choices, and the conflict between standards-driven reform and the experiential learning aspect of STW (Kazis and Pennington 1999). One example of a limited realization of STWOA is a school's failure to provide opportunities for students to apply their learning in the workplace. An evaluation of the progress of STW showed that the "majority of school to work activities taking place in the 34 states involve workplace visits, job shadowing, and teaching students about careers. Only 3 percent of high school seniors surveyed in 1998 took part in initiatives that combined those activities with work-based learning and academic classes that had a career focus" (Kiser 1999, p. 48).

Although strides have been made to connect school to work, continued funding could advance and broaden workplace learning experiences for both students and teachers. States have a degree of leeway in determining how they will define STW goals and principles and how they can relate those goals and principles to other education and work force initiatives that receive funding. The more carefully that STW programs are built into the state curriculum and enjoy the wholehearted support of legislators, as well as employers, teachers, students, and parents, the more likely that states will find ways to fund them (Cutshall 2001b).

Local Businesses Will Sustain STW Programs

STWOA required that the community be involved in education's efforts to connect school to work. Proponents used public awareness activities, conference presentations, and the inclusion of business representatives on STW governing boards to entice local businesses and industries to STW (Gau 2001). In Florida, more than 15,000 employers from 6 industries reported working with students and educators and initiating internal company practices that supported STW (Haley 2001). In Colorado, by August 1998, approximately 20,000 employers involved in 81 local partnerships provided career talks, job shadowing, mentoring, internships, and full apprenticeships (Eslinger 1998).

The enthusiasm of businesses for STW is further evidenced in the development of the National Employer Leadership Council, a "coalition of business executives committed to the tenets of STW and work-based learning opportunities" (Cutshall 2001c, p. 28). A study by this group "showed how the benefits of STW involvement exceeded the costs in the eight companies studied. Bottom line returns ranged from 40 cents to $5.64 per dollar invested" (ibid.).

These returns have been attributed to high student productivity, lower recruitment costs, and reduced training and supervision costs (ibid.). Businesses who were more consistently involved with STW were more likely to provide work-based learning opportunities since their primary interest was increasing the skill levels of their youth labor force (Shapiro 1999).

Self-interest and cost savings are motivators that drive the provision of work-based training opportunities (Wieler and Bailey 1997). Employers are drawn to sustain STW when it works for them. When it doesn't, they will reassess their practices, thus allowing change over time (Hughes, Bailey, and Mechur 1998). Large companies who have great need for qualified workers and the resources to help train them will likely continue to provide support for STW, as will companies that have a continuing need for qualified information technology workers, such as Cisco Systems and Sun Microsystems. Smaller companies are already fighting for their lives and may not be able to add another budget item to their books, whether or not they see value in the programs (Kiser 1999).

Students, Parents, and Educators Recognize the Benefits of STW

Although most sources believe that STW has been a success (Cutshall 2001a), not all stakeholders accept this view. Three concepts that characterize the STW initiative—school-based learning, work-based learning, and connections between school and work—have not been implemented equally across all schools. Medrich et al. (2000) found

that work-related curriculum was the most widely used strategy for implementing STW, with 78% of schools providing it and 55% of students participating in its activities. Integrated academic and vocational curricula were also available at more than half of the schools (67%) and 39% of students participated in these school-based learning activities. Work-based education efforts, however, were not so widely accepted. Although 68% of schools provided job shadowing, 39% mentoring, and 46% internships, few students participated in these work-based learning components—8%, 3%, and 3% respectively (ibid.).

Most stakeholders realize the benefits of authentic work-based educational experiences; however, such experiences are more difficult to provide than are the school-based initiatives. Career and technical educators must be deeply involved in planning and implementing STW programs and must enlist the active support of parents, employers and the community at large if the programs are to continue. Much interaction needs to occur to facilitate students' transitions to work experience programs. A 1999 report from the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, an organization that studies public policy issues, found that "only 347 of the 1,150 students involved in the state's youth apprenticeship programs between 1992 and 1998 completed them" (Kiser 1999, p. 48). Both teachers and employers will need to develop more knowledge and expertise regarding the delivery of work-based learning opportunities so that they can forge better connections between school and workplace learning.

Students and parents have realized the benefits of STW as they see first hand how its programs have led to improved academic achievement. Conclusions about the effectiveness of the STW initiative include the following (Hughes et al. 2001; Kazis and Pennington 1999):

- STW has improved student attendance, academic achievement, and graduation rates.
- STW has served to increase academic rigor in the classroom.
- STW has prepared students for college entrance and has decreased attrition rates.
- STW has helped young people become prepared for employment and obtain higher quality jobs with better wages than they might normally get.

The National School-to-Work Office offers additional evidence to support the theory that STW has benefitted students. It reports that "Philadelphia high school students enrolled in STW programs had higher grade point averages and were more likely to graduate than their classmates who did not take part (Kiser 1999, p. 45). In addition, there is evidence to show that in New York, "seniors involved in STW initiatives "took more advanced science, math, and computer science courses, cut fewer classes, spent more time doing homework, and felt more challenged by their schoolwork" (ibid.).

Conclusion

STWOA has been a driving force in uniting state legislators, employers, schools, parents, and students to enhance student learning and prepare young people for meaningful work. States are providing incentives for schools and employers to work together. Employers are providing up-to-date information about what is happening in the workplace and giving teachers as well as students opportunities to learn first hand about workplace needs. Schools are learning to target their educational practices to enhance academic achievement while connecting learning to its real-world application in the workplace. Teachers, students, and parents are learning what they can do to enhance their own educational and professional development. STW programs have inspired and supported this learning with funding from the STWOA. Now it is the job of all stakeholders in workplace readiness to take the reins and ensure that all of the work and promise that has gone into the STW effort results in improved education and enhanced employment opportunities.

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